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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the increasingly dynamic involvement of information professionals in the learning and teaching process in higher education. The converged service model at the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom) is described. Established in 1995, the converged service brought the university library, computing service, television service, learning accommodation, and printing service together into one organization. Split into five vertical divisions, it operates in the following way: (1) Public Services administers traditional library services, including lending, reference, and the publications program; (2) Information Computing and Support runs the centralized computing service, including the central mail service, campus network, licensing agreements, and computer development work; (3) Planning and Administration includes personnel and planning, buildings, and maintenance; (4) Collection Management covers acquisitions, cataloging, special collections, and the bindery; and (5) Learning & Research Support (L&RS) includes school-based computing services, library liaison, information technology (IT) training, IT-based learning support, television services, and the administration of teaching accommodation. Two current projects illustrate the pro-active involvement of information professionals in the development of the learning and teaching process: Learning Support Partnerships have been created to encourage cooperation between Information Services and the academic schools; and the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) is being established to provide qualification in learning and teaching for higher education lecturers. (MES)

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MANAGING THE NEW LEARNING AGENDA IN A CONVERGED SERVICE ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

An essential element of the present British government's agenda is lifelong leaning (1). In setting out its policies the government has acknowledged the importance of librarians as trainers and has supported this view by providing a huge new investment programme the will benefit public librarians (2). It is the first time in the UK that the work of information professionals has been so publicly acknowledged and supported.

If it is now accepted that the training role is one to which we have a legitimate right, we need to start considering what implications this has for our future development. Certainly questions about the way that training is provided, the place of training in the learning process and the use of IT in the process are all legitimate areas for research and investigation.

The learning agenda and higher education

Though the main emphasis of the UK government has been in the area of public library development it is in the higher education sector that advances in the training role have been most significant. Since the publication of the Dearing Report (3) on higher education there has been a change of emphasis towards learning and away from teaching. Academic staff are expected, for example, to see themselves as learning managers rather than simply as teachers. This approach helps to define the role of information professionals especially when IT is involved. It is especially evident in a converged service environment where there are increasingly signs that they are beginning to be more positively appreciated in the learning process than traditionally has been the case.

Converged service model

The converged service at the University of Birmingham was established during 1995 and brought the university library, computing service, television service, learning accommodation and printing service together into one organisation. Split into five vertical divisions it operates in the following way:

Public Services administers traditional library services including lending, reference and enquiry services, and the publications programme;

Information Computing and Support runs the centralised computing service including the central mail service, the campus network, licensing agreements, computer development work etc;

Planning and Administration includes personnel and planning, buildings and maintenance;

Collection Management covers acquisitions, cataloguing, special collections and the bindery;

Learning & Research Support (L&RS) includes School-based computing services, library liaison, IT training, IT-based learning support, television services, and the administration of teaching accommodation, etc.

Learning & Research Support

The innovative approach to services that L&RS represents has been important in changing the views of academic staff about the role of information professionals on campus. Talking about information professionals rather than just librarians is essential given the mix of skills necessary to ensure that effective learning support is provided.

L&RS is made up of three subject teams; Science & Engineering, Medicine and Life Sciences, and Arts Social Sciences and Law. Each of them is a hybrid team made up of librarians, computer officers and IT advisors and trainers. Other teams in L&RS include the Teaching Accommodation Team which manages the University's centrally organised lecture rooms and the Television Services Team.

Such a focused approach to learning support ensures that Information Services is a part of the strategic planning process for learning and teaching at a central university level. Consequently the value of information professionals is more widely accepted at all levels. They are therefore called upon to offer their expertise and involve themselves in new developments in a way that was rarely the case in the traditional library structure.

Though the preconceptions of some academic teaching staff were difficult to breakdown at first, mutual respect and understanding has grown over the past four years or so. Equally the building of hybrid teams has been a developing process and gradually the logic of working together has produced a climate of co-operation and an appreciation of one another's skills.

Innovations in learning support

The embedding of Information Services in the development of the University's learning strategy and the availability of strong hybrid teams to encourage innovation and deliver support has been a significant aspect of convergence at Birmingham.

Two current projects can help to illustrate the ways in which information professionals are pro-actively involved in the development of the learning and teaching process. They show that information professionals are going beyond the simple acceptance of their training role and are pressing for their wider role to be acknowledged.

Learning Support Partnerships

One of the ways we in Birmingham have tried to encourage co-operation between Information Services and the academic Schools has been through the creation of Learning Support Partnerships (LSPs) in the eight Schools for which the Arts, Social Sciences and Law Team is responsible. This initiative was set up to encourage the process of developing, in a structured way, learning support interfaces as an essential part of the academic process. It was launched because there was a need to encourage such developments in a more proactive way.

Although there were one or two IT enthusiasts in each of the eight Schools involved, the vast majority of academic staff was reluctant about the process. Even though they may have believed the possibilities were worth exploring, most of them either didn't have the time to develop their ideas, or were afraid of the technology involved.

Even though the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy in 1997 had stated that it wanted to have 50% of modules using IT in the learning process within 5 years, little progress had been made in these

subject areas. The intention of the LSPs was to help kick-start the process by offering expert support while trying to rationalise the use of scarce staff resources.

Essential to this development, and a scarce resource, are the IT Advisers and Trainers in the L&RS subject teams. Each of them is an expert in the development of software, the presentation of information, and the creation of search interfaces. Much of their time, however, is spent in undertaking IT training and they therefore have less time to devote to other projects than would ideally be the case. The need to create a channel for approved new project proposals by the Schools was essential. Otherwise each enthusiast would press his or her proposals regardless of overall School need.

Through the Partnership arrangement the skills of the whole team, Learning Advisors, Liaison Librarians and Computer Officers are brought together to provide a comprehensive package of support. In addition the LSPs benefit from the training offered by Learning & Research Support on a number of computer packages. This includes training on Microsoft FrontPage, a program that allows individuals to create Web pages without the need to learn html. The way that such in-house expertise can be brought together to support other internal initiatives is evidence of the synergy that convergence can offer.

Although it was the need to develop learning interfaces that was the initial impetus for the creation of the LSPs, wider organisational changes within the Schools have become necessary as a consequence. It has been impossible, for example, to talk about developing individual learning spaces on the Web without discussing where they would fit into a Schools overall Web structure. Equally, questions of who is to undertake the inputting of information has led to the training of clerical support staff in the use of FrontPage. In short, once the value of the Web is realised in one area it has had a knock-on effect in the wider use of the technology.

When one considers that there was little co-ordinated Web development in these Schools before the launch of the Partnerships project, progress has been considerable. If this has not yet all become evident in terms of tangible Web pages, it has started serious discussions on the role of the Web in the academic process. It has also ensured that information professionals are at the heart of these developments. Though the initiative is continuing the process by which the LSPs have so far developed can be outlined as follows:

i) *Launching the Project.* This was a deliberately low key process. The aim was to present the proposal for a recognised partnership at a time when it would be best received in each of the Schools. As predicted there has been a mixed response, but all except one of the targeted Schools have participated.

The intention has always been to empower the individual lecturer, and through them, the School in developing Web interfaces for their learning process. It was originally envisaged that a small working group of interested academic staff would be set up in each School. This would work in co-operation with the L&RS subject team and make it possible to develop a number of agreed projects each year. Building on this growing momentum, enthusiasm and expertise, the School would gradually move towards the University's learning strategy targets.

ii) *Web structures.* While working with those Schools who had been the first to participate it became evident that further refinement was necessary. Although individual Web projects were identified there was no thought-out School Web structure in which a new Web site could be placed. Such an arrangement gives coherence and helps students find their way around more easily. Though all Schools had put up a Web site and made links, they had gone no further. It was necessary, therefore, to suggest that a firm Web structure should be looked at and recommendations were made on the best ways to construct a coherent site that would cater for both their Internet and intranet requirements.

iii) *Organisational changes.* There then followed questions about who would do the inputting of information and who would maintain the sites once in place. The question of editing was also raised, for the way that information is presented on the Web ought to be uniform and also have some authority if it is to be taken seriously. Consequently discussions are going on within Schools about the roles of their staff in this regard. In addition the possibility of identifying Webmasters to manage the sites is being considered. In at least one School a formal Web Development Board of senior academics has been established to oversee developments.

Training Teachers in Higher Education

A second innovatory development at local level reflects those that are taking place on a national basis in the UK. The Deering Report (3) made a recommendation that an Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) should be established to provide a qualification in learning and teaching for HE lecturers.

From the start of the academic year 1999-2000, the ILT will be in place to encourage new academic staff to qualify for a certificate once they have been recruited to the staff of a university. This qualification, though not yet compulsory, is regarded as an important development that will eventually ensure that teaching standards will improve in the sector.

The working group that is setting up the ILT has produced a discussion paper (4) to ensure a wide consultation across the sector before firm proposals are made. They have proposed that some individuals will qualify as full members while others will receive associate membership. The original proposals left little scope for information professionals to qualify for either category but there is now evidence that this will be radically changed when the full proposals emerge. It seems likely that information professionals will be able to achieve full membership and be put on the same level as their academic colleagues.

This development is significant, not only in the recognition it will give to the importance of the role of information professionals in training and assessing students but also because it acknowledges the role that they play in training staff.

Training Teaching Staff at the University of Birmingham

The University of Birmingham has decided that it will make compulsory the enrolment of new academic staff on an induction course and award its own qualification for academic teachers. This will allow them to register as members if the ILT. The pilot year for this is the current one and Information Services have been very much involved in the process.

The model offers a set of taught modules followed by the logging of approved assignments in a portfolio to be presented for examination at the end of a three year period. Information Services has two compulsory modules on the initial part of the course and will probably be very much involved at the individual project level. The acknowledgement that information professionals are at the heart of the process of training academic staff is important.

In terms of the training that has been offered on the course the feedback on the compulsory modules has been mixed, even though those who are teaching have a good record of training success. This may well be because of the essentially unfocused nature of the training that is having to be offered. Information professionals usually target their courses towards subject groups or to those who want to learn a particular database or skill. Training groups of academic staff who have mixed needs and expectations demands a re-think of approach and style if unquestioned success is to be achieved.

When it comes to helping with the approved assignments of the students the problems are different. Here the students will be very focused on developing different projects and will demand staff resources to meet

their requirements. The range of these will span the responsibilities of Information Services and will include, amongst other things, Web site creation, literature searching and database development.

The embedding of information professionals in the learning support process therefore requires not only a rethink of the way in which the skills base is portrayed but increased investment to meet the growing support needs of the users. With there being over 40 new lecturing staff a year enrolling on this course and each of them having 3 years in which to complete their assignments the staff resource implications are likely to be considerable.

Summary

This paper has described the increasingly dynamic involvement of information professionals in the learning and teaching process in higher education. Converged service environments can facilitate novel and speedier progress in these areas because of the cohesion of hybrid teams. Such teams bring together the specialist skills of differently qualified and experienced information professionals. This can and should result in a dynamic, pro-active approach to the learning support process.

The growing acceptance of the information professionals role in delivering the training necessary for the lifelong learning process is not misplaced. The recognition does however bring responsibilities and it is now necessary to consider how the next steps in this process can be managed. Consideration needs to be given to the training of more hybrid managers, the development of teaching skills for information professionals, and the devising of quantitative and qualitative measures to help justify the provision of additional resources for the learning support process.

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